

# Local News

2015  
IN REVIEW

## Shootings top local news year

By Peter Strescino/The Pueblo Chieftain • Chieftain Photos/File

1.

### Shootings

The shooting began early and kept Pueblo police and citizens on alert all year, making the sustained gunfire and gang violence the top story of 2015, as voted by Pueblo Chieftain reporters and editors.

There were 12 murders in the county last year, the most bailing the killing of 20-year-old Isiah Valpando in September. In a year where gangsters seemed intent on killing other gangsters, Valpando was described as a sweet kid who wanted to make music and get educated.

And had no gang affiliation. Valpando died at an area hospital about two hours after police found him with apparent gunshot wounds. He was bleeding heavily inside a silver car that he had been driving before crashing into a brick fence post in a parking lot situated east of North Union Avenue and south of Vectra Bank.

The crime, which some believe is a case of mistaken identity because of the color and make of Valpando's car, may have been confused with another, brought a rare \$10,000 reward for the capture and conviction of his killers from the FBI. The homicide may have also been a random act of violence.

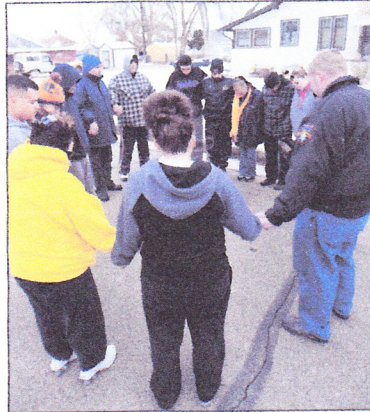
Most acts of violence in Pueblo in 2015 were not so random, even though 2015 saw fewer homicides than 2014, when a record 17 were listed.

In February, the only confirmed gang killing of the year cost 28-year-old Carlos Wayne Perea his life in a drive-by shooting near the Robert Hoag Rawlings Public Library on Abriendo. The Colorado Department of Corrections website listed Perea as being on parole.

But confirmed or not, gang warfare was reported often, on the South Side and the East Side in particular. In May, two drive-by shootings, one on Ivywood Lane and the other on the 800 block of East 13th, injured an 18-year-old man and resulted in a house being shot at. Police said those questioned were "tight-lipped," a consistent description for Pueblo gang crimes and for others like them around the country.

A few days later, in what police said was retaliation for the South Side shooting, the house on East 13th was shot up again. Police questioned several juveniles, but said they didn't get much information.

And on it went, with a woman's car being shot up in May for what she believed to be retaliation for her boyfriend's possible involvement in another incident. A man was shot in a leg in early June and would not cooperate with police when questioned. "The injury wasn't major this time, but it's not like these guys



Pueblo police chaplain Graham Bates (right) leads a prayer last month in the 600 block of Van Buren Street with friends and family of Elijah Aquila, who was shot there and later died of his wounds.

aren't trying," said Capt. Eric Bravo.

There were six suspected gang shooting attempts in late May and early June. Police were making arrests, mostly in pursuing outstanding warrants against suspected gang members, but from mid-May through mid-June, there were eight suspected gang-related shootings, some with victims but most without.

Duane Manzanarez, 24, and Michael Anthony Trujillo, 21, were arrested after allegedly shooting Orlando Berumen, 21, on the South Side.

A witness told police Manzanarez fired two rounds at Berumen and then handed the gun to Trujillo, who then fired four more shots at him as Berumen pleaded for his life.

Berumen was hit by two shots, one in his left leg and one in his right foot, according to police.

Sgt. Eric Gonzales with the Pueblo Police Department said police got involved with the FBI Safe Street Task Force in an effort to combat gang issues. Other local agencies are also assisting.

Retiring City Councilwoman Eva Montoya said "people on the East Side are afraid to go out at night. This kind of violence is making people prisoners in their own homes."

Another shooting in June, when nicer weather after a rain-filled May seemed to encourage young men with guns and grievance, a 21-year-old man was shot multiple times in a home on Amarillo Avenue.

Police Chief Luis Velez said the number of shootings was not unusual. There were 15 shootings in the first six months of 2014, another 10 during the same period in 2013 and 16 in the first half of 2012. Records begin being kept on murders in 1984.

But the tit-for-tat shootings by two warring gangs has amplified the sense of gunfire on Pueblo streets.

"We know who the players are," Velez said. "So far, they've been shooting at each other and no bystanders have been hit."

But almost every day at the end of June brought more shooting.

Two men allegedly involved in shootings, gang and random, were arrested in Gardner, Kan., in mid-July.

Albert Cadena, 35, was shot on the South Side in July. A person in a car that the shots came from said the shooting, allegedly by Trevon Harrison, 21, "was over nothing."

In a nongang-related shooting, Robert Ramirez was allegedly shot by his mother's boyfriend, Francisco Fresquez, 68. Fresquez later committed suicide.

In September, Rick Muniz, 32, died when protecting his Bessemer home from gang taggers. One man was apprehended in the case.

In November, shots rang out three nights in a row on the East Side. Then, a man was shot at six times one night on the normally placid Pueblo Community College campus.

In November, Daniel Sanchez, 31, of Monte Vista, was shot and killed at a convenience store on Orman and Northern. He was said to have gang ties and there was an altercation with people in another vehicle.

The next day, a man's body was found at a Bessemer home. He was identified by police as Richard Martinez, 32. He had been shot to death.

In December, another man was found shot to death in Bruner Park, on the South Side.

2.

### The bus controversy

In May, stung by per-pupil losses to the more successful, at least in state test scoring, Pueblo County District 70, Pueblo City Schools (D60) announced that it would stop allowing its buses to drop kids off at the rural district.

D60 Superintendent Constance Jones told District 70 Superintendent Ed Smith in December 2014 that busing students out of her district was against the law and the practice would have to cease at the end of the 2014-15 school year.

The law also states such a transportation arrangement can occur if the district where the students reside consent to it. None of the D60 board members, as is their recent practice, would not comment on their vote. Now former-member Rose Holloway, often a critic of the board, was absent for the decision.

About 150 students were bused to District 70.

When an editorial in The Chieftain criticized the board for its decision, then-President Kathy DeNiro said it was inappropriate to criticize Jones because of her "stature."

Mike Colucci, then vice president of the D60 board, said he wanted data on the type of students District 70 is taking out of D60, particularly with regard to the students' free and reduced lunch status.

If the data reflects District 70 was pulling students who don't qualify for free and reduced lunches, a poverty indicator, Colucci likened the action to reversing the desegregation laws passed decades ago.

"We're reversing 40 years of Supreme Court decisions. Taking good kids and moving them out of the district and leaving everyone else in the district, I think that's wrong to be doing that."

The incident became a he-said, she-said between the superintendents, with Jones essentially calling Smith a liar.

Jones said she's not opposed to school choice but said she is responsible for the district and must uphold the law and protect the district.

"Just because they were doing it and did not seek our permission and they were openly going around our streets doesn't make it OK," she said. "There are official protocols that we as superintendents and school districts are supposed to follow in order to do the processes and procedures we do in our district."

District 60 lost nearly \$4.7 million in per pupil funding because of students going to District 70 schools. D60 receives nearly \$7,000 in per-pupil funding from the state.



Students get off of a school bus on Pueblo's South Side on March 5. Pueblo City Schools announced that they will no longer bus students to rural District 70 schools.

3.

### Record rains

April showers bring May flowers, they say. In 2015, May downpours brought record rains that must have befuddled longtime Puebloans who look on the sunny side of life, because of the dominating sunshine here.

Not in May. It rained every day but one.

But, the longtime drought that parched the Southeast part of Colorado was drowned in water from the skies.

In 2015, 16.66 inches of precipitation was recorded. The normal year sees 12.57 inches,

and in 2014 11.83 inches.

May 8 was not a typical day, but in May it was not that out of the ordinary.

Severe weather that day in Pueblo County and surrounding areas featured multiple tornado warnings, damaging hail, wind and heavy rain.

Most of Southern Colorado, including Pueblo, Otero, Huerfano and Las Animas counties, was under a tornado watch and tornado warnings were issued by the National Weather Service throughout the day.

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3.

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The first tornado warning in the area came for a severe thunderstorm capable of producing a twister about 15 miles south of Pueblo. Shortly after, a tornado warning was issued for extreme eastern Huerfano County.

Another tornado warning was issued for west of La Junta and parts of Pueblo and Las Animas counties.

No tornadoes were spotted during any of the warnings, but hail pelted Interstate 25 north of Pueblo near Pinon, piling up and giving the appearance that a heavy snowfall had hit the area.

Numerous severe thunderstorm warnings were issued throughout the region over the course of the day. Those thunderstorms produced heavy rain



Fountain Creek erodes nearby Overton Road as members of a utility crew watch one of their power poles float downstream after it was felled by rushing water on May 20.

and high winds in some areas of Pueblo County. Rainfall was so heavy in La Junta that U.S.

50 was closed there due to flooding. That was one day in May.

The month set the record-high precipitation total for May of 55.5 inches, breaking the old re-

cord of 5.43 inches set in 1957.

But the rain continued in June. In the middle of the month, higher than usual flows in Fountain Creek continued to eat at banks and move sediment, trees and debris downstream. Fountain Creek in Pueblo crested near 2,000 cubic feet per second, well above the average flow of under 100 cfs for mid-June.

Pueblo Water was losing money because watering lawns would have been redundant. Overton Road was washed out, and Pueblo Reservoir was so choked that water had to be "evacuated" from it. Power was knocked out by the many storms. Heavy rains continued all summer, with the highest precipitation recorded in a June since 2009, and 2 inches falling south of Pueblo on Aug. 10.

4.

## Marijuana

Marijuana angst dropped a bit in 2015, through the first half of the year.

Pueblo City Council, citing a little-known rule brought to light by The Chieftain, managed to get the retail shop decision off their plate. Amendment 64, the constitutional amendment that legalized marijuana in 2012, states that votes to alter pot rules can come only in even-numbered years. The vote, to OK such shops within city limits, is set for November.

So there are no retail shops in the city, which voted heavily for legalization, and a plethora of weed businesses in the county, which voted 51-49 against.

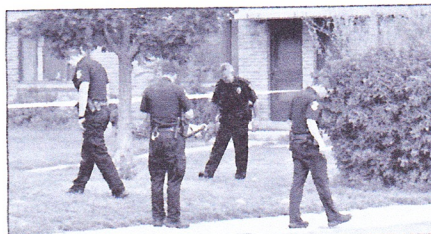
The Southern Colorado Growers Association, a new group in the new industry, suggested rules for new city shops before council stumbled



A part of Amendment 64 that allows for votes only in even-numbered years on whether to allow recreational pot shops in the city let City Council to put off a vote until November.

its way out of the controversy. Countywide, voters passed five marijuana tax questions in the November election.

5.



## Police overtime

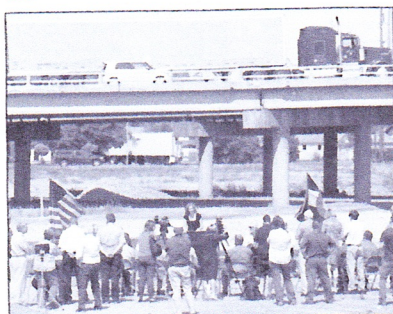
Council was surprised to hear that overtime at the understaffed police department cost about \$1 million

in 2014. Since police OT was already in place, it set a precedent, said council, so they would learn to live

with it. Perhaps because of the OT, council decided to add seven cops to the force in 2016.

Officers with the Pueblo Police Department mark evidence at the site of an afternoon shooting in the 2700 block of Sprague on July 20. About \$1 million in police overtime and a violent year led to the plans to hire more officers in 2016.

6.



Karen Rowe, Colorado Department of Transportation regional transportation director, addresses a crowd as Interstate 25 traffic passes behind her at Ilex on July 1. The crowd gathered at the groundbreaking ceremony for a new interchange.

## Ilex reconstruction finally begins

Crews from Flatiron Construction began rebuilding Interstate 25 between the accident-prone Ilex interchange and City Center Drive in the heart of Pueblo in July.

That beginning was made after years of studies, meetings and proposals. As money becomes available, the project will widen the interstate to three lanes in each direction, straighten I-25 through Downtown, reconstruct interchanges to

improve traffic flow and safety, widen or add shoulders to the highway and construct bridges and trails to enhance bicycle and pedestrian safety.

It's going to take two years to refurbish the freeway between Ilex Street and City Center Drive, but when it's done, there will be three lanes of traffic in both directions and four new but smaller bridges holding up the roadway.

8.

## Some Eilers testing in

Two years after testing in the Eilers neighborhood in 2013, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry reported that four out of 33 children tested (under 6 years old) had lead levels in their blood above the federal standard of 5 micrograms per deciliter. The federal standard used to be 10 micrograms per deciliter. Three other children had blood levels between 4-5 micrograms.

No one else among the 135 tested people had lead levels above the 5 microgram standard. No one tested showed significant levels of arsenic.

The area, now a Superfund site, is in the vicinity of the old Colorado Smelter, and concern over the remnants



Workers take soil samples from the Carol and Albert Galich residence in the Eilers neighborhood in May. Some sampling results came in for the Superfund site project.

of that facility have seemed to worry everyone but those in the neighborhood.

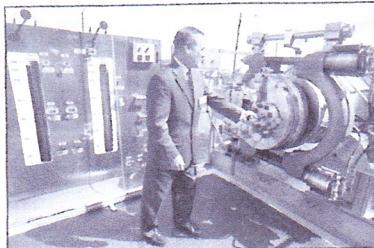
That study zone is a milewide circle centered on the small Eilers neighborhood, but it extends west and north into Bessemer and even reaching The Blocks

area along Abriendo Avenue. It goes east nearly to Salt Creek.

Residents in the area worry about mortgage insurance and earlier en masse asked for property-tax cuts from the county. But they dropped that request.

9.

Steve Bird, project leader for U.S. Army Chemical Materials Activity, demonstrates the device that is used to destroy the chemical weapons currently stored at the Pueblo Chemical Depot.



## Mustard gas destruction begins

After years of waiting, building, hiring and reconfiguring the mission of the Pueblo Chemical Activity, Pueblo Depot or a number of other names for the soon-to-be former Army installation east of Pueblo, the destruction of mustard agents began in 2015.

The actual destruction, began in March. "After months of preparation, testing and scrutiny by oversight and regulatory agencies, the Pueblo team is ready to play its part in meeting our nation's commitment to the 100 percent destruction of the U.S. chemical weapons stockpile," said Conrad F. Whyne, program executive officer for Assem-

bled Chemical Weapons Alternatives, the responsible government agency here.

The county has shown foresight in this area, and has set up an organization that is using and repurposing the area for storage and other services.

PuebloVex — the state board formed in 1994 and charged with redeveloping the 23,000-acre depot — is moving ahead. Less than a year into developing a strategic plan, the group wants to gain full control over a 6,000-acre chunk by the end of this year.

CONTINUED ON 3B



# City and the region

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CENTURY

## Hard-working man a survivor

Manuel Escobedo toiled to raise a family, live to 100

BY JON POMPIA  
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Hard work, the old adage goes, never killed anyone. In fact, it's the key to longevity as far as Manuel Escobedo is concerned.

The gentle-souled Puebloan whose life has revolved around toil and family marked his 100th birthday Saturday at Sharmar Village.

Surrounded by his loved ones, from children to great-grandchildren, Escobedo reflected on a century of life, labor and love.

"I never really gave it much thought," Escobedo said of joining the centenarian club. "Every day that passed by was just another day. But now that I've made it, I feel good about that, especially having my family here with me."

And while it's been a journey filled with hardship, it's that struggle that shaped the resilient Escobedo's character and soul.

As an 8-month-old infant, Escobedo was carried by his parents from Mexico into the United States. Settling in Pueblo, his parents found farming work, the fields of which became the 4-year-old Escobedo's first job site.

Hoping to find a brighter economic picture in Mexico, the family returned home, only to discover that the Great Depression had taken an even worse toll there.

Remaining behind, his parents sent the teen-aged Escobedo and an older brother back to America to forge their own lives.

With an education that didn't extend past the third grade, Escobedo was forced to take jobs wherever he could find them, namely on farms from Wyoming down through Southern Colorado.

"He told me a story about hopping a train to Wyoming for work," said his daughter-in-law Eloise Escobedo. "He only had a light jacket on and almost froze to death in the box car."

"He's certainly been through a lot in his life," said his daughter-in-law Eloise Escobedo. "He only had a light jacket on and almost froze to death in the box car."

With a wife and three children to support, Escobedo spent long hours on the railroad and later at the steel mill. Both positions not only kept him away from his fam-



Manuel Escobedo poses for a photo with one of his great-grandchildren, Frances Stokes, 2, during a family party celebrating his 100th birthday on Saturday.

ily but took a heavy toll on his body.

"He lost his thumb while working on the railroad," said his son Rudolph Escobedo.

"After he smashed it, he kept it covered with tape and mud until he could get to the hospital."

"I had to wait four hours just to get to the hospital in Salida," Escobedo said. "A passenger train had to come by and take me there."

At the mill, repetitive and stressful motions eventually wore out both of Escobedo's elbows and damaged his knees, leading to decades of debilitating pain. Soon after, Escobedo began what he called the most rewarding and productive part of his career, a handyman and carpenter for local Catholic churches, especially Our Lady of the Assumption.

"They didn't have much money," Escobedo said. "So I donated most of my work. But it was something I enjoyed very much and the

church people were good to me."

"Libraries, altars, even a bust of Bishop (Charles) Buswell. You name it and he built it," said Eloise.

Up until November, Escobedo was living a fairly independent life with Rudolph and Eloise. It was only when his knees totally gave out that he was relocated to Sharmar Village.

"Even when he was in great pain, he just wouldn't give up," Eloise said. "He would get out of bed and shower every day, just groaning in pain."

"It was a chance for me to get to really know my dad," said Rudolph of the decade Escobedo spent living with him. "As a child, I just remember him being gone seven days a week, working without a break. But he was a great role model, a loving and caring father."

"Even though my father never went past the third grade, he could read and write very well

and he taught us a lot," said daughter Patricia Komornik. "And he insisted that his children went to college."

In addition to that unbreakable work ethic and commitment to family, Escobedo's sense of humor remains one of his hallmarks.

"His grandson Chris called him today to wish him a happy birthday," Eloise explained. "And he asked Manuel what he wanted for his birthday."

"The reply? 'The green stuff ... and I'm not talking about grass.'"

As Escobedo was presented with his birthday cake, he was smothered with hugs and kisses from his great-grandchildren, who affectionately refer to him as "Ampa."

As tears were dabbed from his eyes, Escobedo took in the scene around him and softly said, "The love of these children ... that is the best birthday gift I could ask for."

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## Some people are just impossible to please



STEVE HENSON  
Managing Editor

"You only print bad news. How come you never print news about the good things people are doing?"

I hear that whine from time to time, and my response is always the same:

Oh, I guess you missed those dozens of local sports stories we print every week. Or maybe the Classic Pueblo every Monday in which we showcase people, places, events and businesses that make Pueblo special.

Or the frequent feature stories about Puebloans and the interesting things they do. Or the fun features like when people turn 100 years of age or paint their houses with Broncos signs. Or the numerous fun photos showcasing our community that our photographers produce. Or the extensive coverage of our local governments, so local readers will know what's going on.

OK. Enough of the sarcasm. I apologize ... sorta.

You see, I'm pretty frustrated. Here's why: In a series that ended Friday, The Chieftain published fascinating profiles of some of our community's up-and-coming leaders. I enjoyed how each of them talked about their love for Pueblo, how they made a deliberate decision to stay here and contribute to the community's success.

I was psyched up! I was inspired! It gave me hope for our community's future that such dedication is out there — and they're young people!

Then the complaining started. "Why didn't you feature more women?" a handful of writers complained.

"Why wasn't there more diversity?" another said.

"Anytime you limit the list to such a small number, you're asking for trouble," another trolled. Aargh!

As I explained in our Page 1A story the day these began — I thought clearly — The Chieftain didn't select the list. We turned to our local chambers of commerce and asked them to forward an email to their members. They did that. The email asked the chamber members to nominate names for the series, and to send those emails to The Chieftain.

That happened. We tabulated the dozens of emails we received and put together a list of the top vote-getters.

The list was heavily tilted toward men. Well, I don't know what to say to that. It wasn't our list. (Now I know I'm frustrated. I've already made that point and now I'm just repeating myself.)

As for the complaint that the list was small, that was a pragmatic decision. We were looking for a to-day or slightly longer series of articles that we thought would entertain and inspire you, beloved readers, during the holiday season.

This list was never meant to be THE list of the only up-and-coming community members. It was meant to be representative, and it was. And yes, we know there are hundreds more out there we could have profiled.

The reality is, if those other individuals continue to contribute to the community, it's likely their efforts will be written about in The Chieftain. Because that's what we do. We showcase good things and good people in our community — every day, every week, every month and every year for nearly 150 years.

We do that, of course, when we're not busy looking for all sorts of negative stories to publish every day.

OK. Sorry. Cheap shot. But come on! We tried to do something good for the community, to give us all hope for our future — and, I argue, the articles were terrific — and people complain.

What is wrong with us as a society that we have to criticize everything? Must we find fault in all that we see, hear and read?

I hope that some or even most of you enjoyed the profiles that we published. And I hope that you will enjoy our future reporting on these and other young leaders who will move Pueblo forward.

I promise you'll see that kind of reporting continue in your Chieftain, your community newspaper.

Wow! Thank you for letting me figuratively count to 10 this morning. Have a great day!

Steve Henson, who as you read this is wearing his Von Miller T-shirt and is in his happy place preparing to watch the Broncos-Chargers game, is The Pueblo Chieftain's managing editor. He can be reached at 541-0006, ext. 410; at shenson@chieftain.com; on Twitter @SteveHensonME.

## 2015 IN REVIEW

Chieftain Photo/File

### 10.

CONTINUED FROM 2B

#### New cops coming

There will be seven additional police officers on the streets this year, thanks to an improved economy, complaints about long waits for police assistance and the \$1 million overtime bill. On some shifts there have been as few as eight officers to cover the city's quadrants.

### OTHER STORIES

New bike lanes, like this one on Greenwood near 17th Street on the North Side, opened around the city, creating some confusion for drivers and criticism of the city.



Some other stories receiving votes (with sports and business stories rated in those sections) were, in order of votes: bike lanes installation and complaints council's weed war and subsequent penalties for offenders; Republican Party problems, with the local GOP's financial person under fire and former Chairwoman Becky Mizel accused of stealing files and being involved in an effort to oust the state chairman; three new City Schools board members, all former educators, elected; the city elections, where two former councilmen were returned to office as well as a sharp critic of the council; the probable razing of the Downtown power plant; and local forays into wind and solar power.

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